

# Public and private in Australian schooling

Australia, 1788-2010

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The words *public* and *private* have been used in attempts to describe the ownership, governance and purposes of Australian schools and education from close to the beginnings of British colonisation in 1788. They are concepts that had little meaning for Indigenous society before, and for some time after initial colonisation.

The meanings of these words shift over time. Nor do *public* and *private* schools necessarily describe the same kinds of institutions in Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States or Canada. Nevertheless *public*, based on the Latin *publicus* has a primary set of meanings based around “the people”, usually conceived as a whole, sometimes as the nation. *Publicus* may also be about that which is accessible to all people—or citizens at least. Similarly the Latin *privatus* as the basis of *private*, was initially about withdrawal from public life. It is associated with individuals and groups detached from civic life. It can also be about behaviour and characteristics kept or removed from public knowledge or accountability.

Such lexically based definitions are only a starting point for understanding the use of these words. For example, some historians regard the rise of the *private* as an important moment in the modern history of gender and the family. Emergent middle class families through the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth century were increasingly thought of as *private*. The association of middle class women with the *private* or *domestic* sphere, leaving men to the *public*, affected private schooling. If middle and ruling class girls were to be educated in schools at all, it would occur in *private* schools and academies. In the process, private schooling reinforced middle class familial values, including a curriculum based on the *accomplishments* (see glossary below) that were valued in private and familial life.

From the early nineteenth century therefore, the words have described different kinds of institutions and education-related behaviours. In some periods *public* has been thought of as associated with responsible and virtuous civic behaviour. In other periods the connotations have been less positive.

Especially salient for Australia (and the United States) is the association between the emergence of public schooling and the interests of Protestant, and then an increasingly secular middle class. Public institutions may in fact, be marked by restricted access. For example, public schools in Australia have restricted access at different periods to young people on the grounds of their racial identities, and their mental or physical disabilities or characteristics. Many Aboriginal children and families experienced prolonged periods of exclusion from public schools in most Australian colonies and states. In the process public schooling was crafted to meet a specific vision of the emerging (white) nation.

A consequence of such a vision meant that other communities, often defined by minority religious or ethno-national characteristics have excluded themselves from public schools. From the 1850s for example, the bishops of the Catholic Church in Australia have insisted that Catholics ought not attend public schools.

By the circumstances of their foundations, private schools are likely to routinely exclude some youth and their families from access. The reasons and justifications for exclusions vary. Private schools, usually being market aware, often cater to families that have specific private needs of schooling. In the process, such schools may exclude others who are seen to threaten these interests.

## “Public“ schools in Australian history

### (1) Public schools as schools for the governing class

An early meaning of the word *public* had to do with the attempt to recreate in the Australian colonies similar institutions that educated boys of the aristocracy and governing classes in England. The great *public* schools of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were grammar schools of the *established* Church of England that had grown so wealthy and influential as a result of *endowments* (see glossary) and patronage, that they were described as the great public schools of England. Attendance at schools such as these, Eton, Winchester, Harrow, Rugby and others, usually ensured entrance into the universities of Oxford or Cambridge, and careers in the armed forces and government. These *public* schools were thought of as enduring national, public institutions in contrast to the often transient private schools of the middle class.

Early attempts to found schools on this model in Australia were not particularly successful. The core curriculum of the great public schools of England included the classical languages, Latin and Greek. Colonial families usually favoured schools teaching more commercially useful, potentially wealth creating subjects instead. Nevertheless, from the 1830s schools were founded on this model. The Kings School at Parramatta in Sydney (1831- ), and the Collegiate School of St Peter in Adelaide (1847- ) are early examples.

Therefore an early meaning of the word *public* in relation to schooling in Australia had to do with a school for boys, usually but not always owned by a church, whose aim and role was to produce the governing class, including the owners of urban and rural wealth. Such schools were not *public* in one sense, because they were inaccessible to all but a minority of families. They claimed the word *public* because they considered they produced boys who would be leaders of society, including government. The purpose was arguably an education for the “public sphere” rather than the “private”. Decades later there were similar schools for girls, though not until well into the twentieth century was the idea that girls might routinely aim for a presence and career in the “public sphere” accepted.

## **(2) Public schools as Church of England schools**

From earliest times in the colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) there was another idea about what constituted public schooling. As part of the government of the first Australian colony, New South Wales, there were colonial chaplains who were accountable to the governors of the colony. They were clergy of the Church of England, and there was an assumption that this church was the *established* (see glossary) church in the colonies. Colonial chaplains such as Richard Johnson and Samuel Marsden had responsibilities for supervising government and government-assisted schools. The earliest *public* schools of New South Wales, including the orphan schools, male and female, and larger schools in Sydney and Parramatta, taught the catechisms of the Church of England.

This use of the word *public* occurred with the appointment of the clergyman, Thomas Reddall as Director General of the “Government Public Schools” of the colony in 1824. The transitory high point of early colonial *public* schools being Church of England schools came with the establishment of the Church and School Corporation that lasted from 1826 to 1833. In theory the Church and School Corporation was to be supported by a grant of one seventh of the lands in New South Wales. Opposition to the Corporation included other religious denominations such as the Wesleyans (Methodists), Presbyterians and Roman Catholics. They insisted that their schools had as much right to assistance from public or government funds as those of the Church of England, in fact challenging the assumed authority and certainty of that Church that it was a *public* institution as opposed to being but one religious denomination among many.

Early archdeacons and bishops of the Church of England in the Australian colonies, including Thomas Hobbes Scott and William Broughton fought to sustain the idea that a public school should be a Church of England school, but the 1830s was the last decade that the argument retained force.

Nevertheless in all colonies for some time most *denominational schools* (see glossary) were part of a *public system* of schools because they were assisted by public funds. Government appointed boards of education distributed public funds and imposed a limited number of public responsibilities on the denominational schools that were assisted.

## **(3) Public schools as non-denominational, government-funded and controlled schools**

From the 1830s there were attempts to produce “National” schools in New South Wales. Unlike the Church of England “national schools” in Britain, these colonial schools would not be controlled by churches. The phrase *National school* rather than *public school* usually described the new foundations. In Western Australia they were usually called *colonial* schools.

From 1848 in New South Wales, still incorporating the future Queensland and Victoria, a National Schools Board was established. Its early administrator, William Wilkins, worked to develop systematic teacher training through pupil teachers, intrusive school inspection, uniform textbooks and a more centralised administration in general. These elements would later define the Australian public school system. The curriculum would be systematised with secular content coexisting with *common Christianity* elements (see glossary). William Rusden’s classic polemic defending the new conception of public education in Victoria and other Australian colonies was published in 1853 as *National Education* (The Argus: Melbourne).

The first colony to withdraw government funding to denominational schools was South Australia in 1851. In that sense, the first complete alignment of publicly-assisted schools with non-denominational schools occurred in that colony. In the process, the idea of the *independent school* may have had its origins. New schools, mainly belonging to churches, were no longer *dependent* on government funding.

Usually on the grounds that dual public funding, of denominational and National schools was wasteful, each colony cut loose the denominational schools and built systems of public education, named as such. This process was dependent on the passing of the so-called “free, compulsory and secular” Education Acts, mainly in the 1870s. In New South Wales, a “public school” system had been established in 1866, but it was only in 1880 that

public funding (state aid) to church schools was discontinued. The 1872 Education Act in Victoria was the most thoroughgoing in eliminating even limited denominational access to pupils in public schools.

The dominant definition of an Australian *public* school was set. A *public school* was a government school, controlled by a state department of education. At best clergy or lay church members for a short period once weekly might attend to instruct pupils. The curriculum over time became increasingly secular. Some common Christianity elements survived in public schools through the twentieth century.

## “Private“ schools in Australian history

### (1) Private schools as ventures owned by individuals and families

In the early days of New South Wales there was not much *private* in existence. Most of the population was dependent on government to some degree. Where there were private initiatives to set up schools, teachers often sought government assistance, rations for example, and their efforts were likely supervised by Anglican chaplains.

Nevertheless by the beginning of the nineteenth century there were genuine *private* schools in existence. Such schools were sensitive to limited and shifting markets for their services. Many such schools were conducted in private dwellings, and sometimes houses converted into schools.

There was an increasing diversity of such schools over the nineteenth century. They included:

1. for the labouring classes, the so-called dame schools, that promised the teaching of “letters” to the children of neighbours when their labour was not needed by their families. The owner-teachers of such schools were often women who needed an income in addition to what their often absent male partners may have provided.
2. for the middling classes, sometimes colonial clergymen, without the benefit of incomes from church lands or other endowments took boys, promising an education that sometimes including the classics
3. again for the middling classes, for boys and girls separately there were schools founded by men and women that promised the teaching of subjects that changed as rapidly as there was a market for them. Schools for boys could develop a classical curriculum, commercial subjects, or the applied sciences and natural philosophy.
4. for the wealthier classes, some schools developed to a considerable size, and were housed in substantial and impressive buildings, such as Whinham College in Adelaide or Julie Vieusseux’s East Melbourne Ladies’ College (1857-1882).

These were genuine *private* schools, but they were not destined to last long into the twentieth century. Their principals and owners found it increasingly difficult to compete in a market where low fees or free schooling was offered by the public sector. State regulations began to force the closure of small, mainly elementary, private schools on the grounds of various inefficiencies.

In the post-elementary sector, churches and state governments developed substantial institutions, collegiate schools and public high schools respectively. As the colonial universities began offering credentials of value through public examinations, private schools enrolling older youth followed their syllabuses and entered increasing numbers for public examinations. In the process they opened themselves to public scrutiny. Despite many successful engagements with the process, the public high schools and church collegiate schools were better resourced to succeed in the long term. Many private schools were incorporated into existing church collegiate schools. Some, such as Barker College in Sydney in 1919 and Walford School in Adelaide, as late as 1956, were bought by the Church of England and became Church of England collegiate schools.

A *private school* therefore initially meant being owned by one person or one family. The school was almost totally dependent on fees and the energies and planning of their proprietor-principals. Most of these schools were short-lived.

### (2) Private schools as any schools not run by government

As the idea that the only public school was a government or state school developed in the late nineteenth century, there was a demand for a collective term that grouped all non-public schools. Although the original private schools began to disappear, the term *private school* did not. Through the twentieth century it began to be applied indiscriminately to a range of different kinds of schools. They included:

1. the remaining genuine private schools
2. systems of schools developed by churches
3. secular schools that were independent of government departments of education
4. church owned schools that were governed by independent trusts or councils

The latter two groups, especially the substantial foundations, were described by Sherington, Petersen and Brice (1987) as *corporate* schools. That term distinguished them from the range of private, small, alternative and parochial church schools. Some corporate schools continued to describe themselves as *greater public schools* from the English usage.

## “Public“ and “private“ in the twenty-first century

The use of the term *private*, meaning any non-government school is misleading. A relatively poor Catholic parochial school governed by a diocesan Catholic Education Office has very little in common with an exclusive, high-fee, independently governed corporate school.

The description *private* for all such schools is especially problematic after the 1960s when most non-public schools were once more publicly funded to some degree by governments. At the same time there is some justification for the word's survival as an economy and society valuing *private enterprise*, and the legitimacy of private choice between schools, and in the process reinforcing family values and traditions, suggests the importance of *private* schools to meet such concerns.

The term and process of *privatisation* was significant in developing public policy, including education, from the late 1970s. It legitimately describes a process by which the ownership and control of public schools is sold or transferred to churches or other entities. The opposite process, the *nationalisation* of non-government schools is barely a detectable occurrence in Australian educational history.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics does not use the term *private* for the counting and discussion of schools. It uses the names of churches such as Anglican, Catholic, Uniting, Orthodox etc. Its main publication *Schools Australia (4221.0)* uses the main categories *Government* and *Non-government* with the broad subcategories “Catholic” and “Independent”. An obvious problem with these sub-categories are that some Catholic schools are also Independent schools. They are not governed by Catholic Education Offices. Another problem with *independent* as a category are the connotations of the term *independent*. In an era of renewed public funding, and the consequent meeting of a limited number of public obligations as a result, and the requirements of other legislation, *independent* does not describe the circumstances of the sector. Some have argued for the replacement term “publicly-assisted schools”.

The politics of public and private, church and state, in schooling have been fierce for nearly two centuries. The word *private* is often used by public school supporters to describe non-government schools as failing to consider the educational needs of most Australian families, as exclusive in several different ways, including the enrolment requirements based on capacity to pay fees and correct religious affiliation. Public funding is seen as inequitable under such circumstances. Non-government schools tend to resist the term *private* because it emphasises the lack of access that the broad public have to them. *Independent* has better public relations value. Since the 1980s especially, Liberal-National Coalition governments, but often Labor as well, have tended to foster markets of schools, in which parents are expected to exercise their power to choose the school that best suits their family's circumstances. This may occur within public and non-government school sectors, or across them. This development is reminiscent of the mid-nineteenth century National, denominational and private school markets of that era.

Because public schools in poorer areas of Australian cities and rural areas are responsible for educating children from poorer and non-English speaking immigrant families, a social *residualisation* (see glossary) process has often occurred. Where early in the twentieth century public schools seemed to be overtaking private and corporate schools in reputation and results, in the early twenty-first century the situation is mainly reversed.

In this entry there are several issues that have barely been considered. One is the degree to which *public* schools are used by families for *private* purposes, and the reverse. The higher education sector, including technical and further education and the universities, has not been considered. Public and private provision in the pre-school sector also has a long history and remains an issue of contemporary significance given the range of private, community, corporate and government providers.

*Public* and *private* are words significant in the history of gender relations and this has profoundly affected the character of different schools for boys and girls.

The defining of *public* and *private* in schooling is an active and continuing process. Australia is not alone in this respect.

## Glossary

*Accomplishments* in girls' education contributed to the making of useful, respectable middle class girls, accomplished in languages, music and other arts. They formed part of a curriculum that reinforced idealised

conceptions of acceptable femininity, marriage, child rearing and family life. In the historiography there has been an overdue corrective to the older approach that it was a superficial curriculum, the main focus of which was to assist girls in "husband hunting" (see Theobald, 1996).

*Common Christianity* is the idea that National and public schools in the Australian colonies could develop curricula based on common or agreed elements of the teachings of the main Christian churches/denominations active in Australia. Unlike the Catholic Church, the Protestant churches mainly reconciled themselves to the proposition from the 1870s to the 1970s.

*Denominational school.* A school run by one of the Christian churches. The term is mainly used in nineteenth century educational history.

*Endowments.* Substantial gifts, usually of land and/or capital, that enabled the foundation and/or support of schools.

*Established church.* Where a church is the official church of the state or nation, then it is an established church. The established Church of England in England had some expectation that it would be the established church in the early Australian colonies. In those circumstances, popular or common schools provided by any established church would likely be *public* schools.

*Residualisation.* The process that occurs when some schools attract or are left with unrepresentative shares of students in trouble, poverty or special needs.

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